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# THE PHOENIX MURDERS

THE CIA'S PHOENIX PROGRAM WAS DESIGNED TO "NEUTRALIZE" THE VIET CONG LEADERSHIP. INSTEAD, TENS OF THOUSANDS OF VIETNAMESE CIVILIANS WERE KILLED. THE VIET CONG NOW GOVERN SOUTH VIETNAM, AND WILLIAM COLBY, WHO SUPERVISED PHOENIX, IS NOW THE DIRECTOR OF THE CIA.

Back in those difficult days in the White House when the war in Vietnam was getting bigger and seeming more unwinnable every day, it must have looked like such a beautiful plan: get the CIA to pull together all the intelligence people on our side—the South Vietnamese police, the military, everyone who knew anything about the Viet Cong; pinpoint the enemy's political leaders, the men who called the shots; then send in commandos to neatly, surgically take them out of the picture. You risked only a few men. You ripped out the heart of the hated Cong. And the insurgency collapsed from within.

It was simplicity itself. But what became known as "the Phoenix Program" was one of those concepts that did not move gracefully from the drawing board to real life—at least not in the hands of the CIA.

In fact, Phoenix—the CIA's bird that never flew—will probably go down in history as one of the agency's messiest blunders. As it unfolded in the hamlets

and villages of Vietnam, Phoenix was bumbling, slipshod operation, poorly supervised and controlled, shot through with corruption and ineptness—a tragically fatal operation in which tens of thousands of ordinary South Vietnamese civilians were murdered, swept into prisons, or often, horribly tortured. In the end, Phoenix failed completely to even dent the so-called Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI)—the political apparatus whose members are now governing Communist Saigon.

Nothing worked the way the planners Phoenix had hoped. Precise intelligence on the Viet Cong's political leaders never surfaced; most of the data was sketchy and inaccurate. At best Phoenix "targeted" low-ranking Communist functionaries; at worst the victims were the political or social enemies of the local Saigon government province chief. President Nguyen Van Thieu liked Phoenix (there were charges he used it to dampen the spirits of would-be rivals), but many of his subordinates did not. So, the ranks of Operation Phoenix were layered with incompetents and castoffs and, apparently, not a few sadists.

None of the various agencies involved in Phoenix—least of all the CIA—was willing to share its best information. South Vietnamese agents proved to be unreliable and failed to penetrate deeply, while the big-nosed, white-skinned Americans could not operate covertly at all. Meanwhile, Viet Cong agents wormed their way into nearly every important office in the Saigon government and probably infiltrated the ranks of the CIA's local agents as well. So surprise intrusions into the Viet Cong heart were virtually precluded even if the intelligence had been developed.

By all accounts, only a small percentage of the deaths attributed to Phoenix came as a result of any kind of planned intelligence effort coordinated with a specific attack. Most often, the casualties occurred in standard military operations and the dead were identified *after the fact* as members of the Viet Cong Infrastructure—sometimes accurately, sometimes not. Phoenix, in reality, was not the scalpel that had been envisioned, but a coarse dragnet that snared not the wily Viet Cong political chiefs, but the unfortunate junior cadre—the messengers and the tax collectors—or unwitting civilians who got caught in the cross fire.

Phoenix, which in Vietnamese is "Phuong Huong" (the mythical bird that brings news of peace), not only failed to eliminate the key members of the Viet Cong political apparatus, but, if anything, may have speeded the Communist takeover by further alienating the people of South Vietnam with its reckless terror and haphazard harassment.

Most of the Americans who were personally involved with Phoenix in the field agreed to discuss it with me only on the condition that their names not be pub-

42,000 men and was established by Green Berets, established a chain of forts for frontier security and sent squads on forays into Laos and Cambodia.

Later, the agency created "Counter-Terror" teams that tried to systematically return the violence the Viet Cong had visited upon Saigon government officials, and presaged the Phoenix program. Then came the fifty-nine-man Rural Development or "RD Cadre" units that were assigned to every province to dig wells, bolster village spirit, gather intelligence, and counter local guerrillas.

To tackle these assignments and Phoenix, as well as to handle its ostensibly basic mission of collecting intelligence, the CIA put between 400 and 600 agents into Vietnam—reportedly the largest force it has ever fielded in a single country. Agents were plucked from posts all over the world and dozens of soldiers of fortune were hired on contract to help out, too. Many of the veteran cloak-and-dagger men resented the paramilitary work and argued that it wasn't what they were supposed to be doing.

But Robert W. Komer, a former CIA analyst, White House special assistant, and head of the American "pacification program" in Vietnam, contends that President Johnson was adamant that the United States effort in Vietnam should not be strictly military, and had specifically called the CIA into the fray.

Komer, a blustery, hard-driving man who was known in Vietnam as "Blowtorch Bob," says it is "just ridiculous" to argue that CIA operations in Vietnam violated the agency's charter "when there's been a long record of application [of this sort of thing] in places like Cuba, Laos, and Iran."

A strange argument, it would seem, when most critics are contending that the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Secret War in Laos, and the overthrow of the government of Iran are precisely the kind of activities the agency should not be involved in.

But Komer did not earn his nickname by chance, and he charged on, hardly pausing for breath: "Any insider knows that the impetus for all these things came from the top—the president and his special assistants."

As authority for the CIA's ventures beyond the realm of intelligence, Komer cites the section of the National Security Act which states that among the duties of